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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003220

SIPDIS

NSC FOR CBARTON
HQ SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/14/2014

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: COPEI PRESIDENT FAVORS US/GOV RAPPROCHEMENT

REF: CARACAS 03167

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

[11.](#) (C) Summary: Christian Democratic Party (COPEI) president Eduardo Fernandez offered the Ambassador on October 14 his views on US policy in Venezuela and on best strategies to implement it. Fernandez supported current efforts to improve the bilateral relationship and urged respect for Venezuelan sovereignty. He struck a moderate tone on President Hugo Chavez, criticizing his antidemocratic practices while conceding that he would recognize him as a democratically elected President. Fernandez's "counsel" accords with the USG approach, although he urged perhaps too much caution in the face of Venezuelan sovereignty concerns. Fernandez's moderation, nonetheless, will not ingratiate his party with the GOV. End summary.

An Opposition Opinion of US Policy...

[12.](#) (C) Christian Democratic Party (COPEI) president Eduardo "El Tigre" Fernandez told the Ambassador during a courtesy call October 14 that the Embassy's job in Venezuela was to procure the best possible relationship with both the GOV and the Venezuelan people. He submitted that the Embassy had influence in supporting Venezuelan democracy, human rights, and government institutions. The USG, he said, should speak in defense of principles--such as democratic and press freedoms--with "pugnacity."

[13.](#) (U) According to Fernandez, the Embassy could bolster its image by respecting Venezuelan sovereignty and by not becoming a "political actor" or an opposition party. Fernandez recommended couching US discourse in terms of an esteem for Venezuelan political experience and a refusal to intervene in its internal processes. In a later aside, he mentioned having told every US ambassador he had met that baseball was a "secret weapon" that the US could use to influence Venezuelan public opinion. Calling himself a "fanatic of dialog," Fernandez valued the Boston Group, a bipartisan exchange effort of Venezuelan and US legislators.

...And the GOV

[14.](#) (C) Fernandez said improving the bilateral relationship would be complicated because the GOV's words and actions were often different. The GOV, he said, presented a bellicose image, but it had been an exemplary debtor and a trustworthy energy supplier. He added that investors in the petroleum sector have had no complaints. Prompted by the Ambassador, Fernandez conceded that the GOV decision on October 10 to increase royalty payments on heavy crude projects (REFTEL) was an exception.

[15.](#) (U) Fernandez warned that many radical opposition elements wanted Chavez overthrown, but he recognized that Chavez was elected by majority vote. He acknowledged that his party could not disavow the referendum after the OAS and the Carter Center had legitimized it. According to Fernandez, the outcome of the referendum was his party's problem, not that of the United States; multilateral accords obligated both Washington and the Venezuelan public to accept the results.

[16.](#) (U) Turning to criticism, Fernandez said President Hugo Chavez's administration had roots in military culture rather than in democratic, juridical tradition. He noted that the National Assembly and the judiciary were controlled by a government accustomed to issuing orders rather than engaging in dialog. Referring to the proposed Media Law, he lamented that the judicial system was in dangerous straits.

Comment

17. (C) Although Fernandez resists Chavez-bashing, his moderation will not save COPEI from drawing fire from the GOV, which brands opposition groups as traitors to the revolution. Accordingly, any high-profile US encounters with such parties will afford Chavez anti-US fodder. True to his non-confrontational nature, Fernandez had relatively innocuous suggestions for packaging US policy. His counsel about honoring Venezuelan sovereignty is prudent, but we would not translate respect for sovereignty into silence and inaction on controversial issues. Otherwise, Fernandez's "advice" sounds much like the USG's current operating strategy. End Comment.

8.(U) Bio Note: Fernandez spoke fondly of American culture and his two years at Georgetown University, where he received a master's degree in political science, according to the official COPEI website. He jokingly mentioned having trouble receiving a US visa for 20 years after he wrote to advise former President Nixon against visiting Venezuela because of political instability. He said US Immigration had mistakenly identified him as a communist.

McFarland

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